



MAYOR AND COUNCIL AGENDA

NO. 5

DEPT.: / City Clerk's Office

DATE: September 27, 2004

ACTION:

Presentation of a Certificate of Recognition to Juliette Rizzo, Ms. Wheelchair America 2005

ACTION STATUS:

FOR THE MEETING OF: 10/04/04

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PUB. HEARING

INSTRUCTIONS

APPROVED

EFFECTIVE

ROCKVILLE CITY CODE,

CHAPTER

SECTION

☐ **CONSENT AGENDA**

RECOMMENDATION:

IMPACT: ☐ Environmental ☐ Fiscal ☐ Neighborhood ☐ Other:

BACKGROUND:

Miss Rizzo was awarded the title of Ms. Wheelchair America on July 31, 2004, in Richmond Virginia. Ms. Rizzo represented Maryland in the pageant. As Ms. Wheelchair America, Ms. Rizzo will share her message, "Find your courage, share your vision, and change the world," as she travels throughout the United States this year.

PREPARED BY:

Date

LIST OF ATTACHMENTS:

Two background articles about Ms. Rizzo



Ms. Wheelchair MD

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Up



Congratulations to Juliette Rizzo, Ms. Wheelchair Maryland 2004, on being crowned Ms. Wheelchair America 2005 on Saturday, July 31, 2004 in Richmond, Virginia. Juliette was selected as Ms. Wheelchair America from a group of distinguished women from 26 states and the District of Columbia. Juliette will share the message "Find your courage, share your vision, and change the world" as she travels around the country during this next year. Best wishes to Juliette as she begins her *Reign of*

Possibilities!

For more information on the Junior Miss and Ms. Wheelchair Maryland organizations, please visit the official website at:

www.ms-wheelchair-md.com

Or

Contact robert@dateable.org

Send mail to webm@dateable.org with questions or comments about this web site.
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Posted on Sat, Jul. 31, 2004

Md. Woman Crowned Ms. Wheelchair America

Associated Press

RICHMOND, Va. - Juliette Rizzo of Maryland was crowned Ms. Wheelchair America 2 Saturday, beating out contestants from 24 other states and the nation's capital for to represent the achievements of women with disabilities.

Rizzo, 36, of Rockville, will travel the country for the next year as an advocate for the million Americans with disabilities.

Rizzo contracted a systemic infection when she was 3 years old, resulting in juvenile arthritis, scleroderma and fibromyalgia, program organizers said.

She earned a master's of journalism degree from the University of North Texas and a director of communication and media for the U.S. Department of Education in the off education and rehabilitative services.


The Ms. Wheelchair America Program, open to women 21 to 60 who use a wheelchair mobility, judges on public speaking, personal interviews and on-stage interviews.



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Juliette Rizzo crowned Ms. Wheelchair America 2005

E-Mail This Article

by **Peggy Vaughn**
Staff Writer

Aug. 4, 2004

Juliette Rizzo draws strength from her Italian heritage in her lifelong battle with a disease that has left her wheelchair bound.

"My motto is 'bella figura,' an Italian saying that means I always try to put my best wheel forward," said Rizzo, 36, of Rockville.

Crowned Ms. Wheelchair America 2005 on Saturday night following a weeklong competition in Richmond, Va., Rizzo is about to embark on a yearlong reign speaking out on behalf of more than 50 million Americans with disabilities.

"This is a unique avenue for a woman in a wheelchair to educate and advocate on the behalf of people with disabilities," Rizzo said. "It's amazing what a crown and sash will do -- people just flock to you."

Now in its 32nd year, the Ms. Wheelchair America program highlights the achievements and abilities of women with disabilities. This year, 26 women competed after having already won their state titles. Contestants must be between 21 and 60 years old and use a wheelchair for daily mobility. Marital status is not a consideration.

"It's not a beauty pageant, it is completely based on our achievements and accomplishments," Rizzo said.

Having served as Ms. Wheelchair



J. Adam Fenster/The Gazette

Juliette Rizzo of Rockville was crowned Ms. Wheelchair American at a gala on Saturday night in Richmond, Va. She won the coveted title in a competition that focused on inner beauty, public speaking skills and accomplishments in advocating for the disabled. She will spend the next year traveling the country raising public awareness of the disabled.

Advertisement

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Maryland 2004, Rizzo is well known for her inner beauty, said Robert Watson, the state coordinator for the program.

"Juliette has never been about Juliette, she's about reaching out to empower people with disabilities," he said. "She has the ambition and drive to make a difference and a smile that makes people receive her with open arms."

Still, when her name was announced as the winner during Saturday night's gala, Rizzo felt on top of the world.

"I was honored to be in the top five contestants, and humbled to be selected [as the winner]," she said.

Rizzo now begins a year of travel and speaking engagements at civic, government church and social groups in hopes of raising public awareness of people with disabilities.

Speaking out is nothing new for Rizzo, who serves a similar role as communications director on special education and rehabilitation services at the U.S. Department of Education.

"We've come so far over the past 14 years and the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act," she said. "But there are still so many barriers, both architectural and attitudinal."

Rizzo brings with her plenty of experience. She is a board member of the Metropolitan Washington Chapter of the Arthritis Foundation, and served as chairwoman of the Arthritis Walk in Montgomery County that raised \$21,000. Last October, she was appointed to the Montgomery County Commission on People with Disabilities.

"Juliette brings a warmth and a positive attitude towards life to all her efforts," Betsy Luecking, commission program manager. "She's a role model for all of us."

Aside from providing a platform for advocacy, Rizzo said her new title comes with unique opportunities.

"There's talk about my riding in a float in Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade in New York City and a meeting President George W. Bush," Rizzo said. "Wherever I go over next year, my message will be that you can find your courage, share your vision and change the world."

Rizzo's own world changed dramatically at age 3 when she was diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis, scleroderma and fibromyalgia. Her family moved from Fort Worth, Texas to Dallas so she could receive treatment at the Texas Scottish Rite Hospital for Children. For the next 18 years, she was treated for pain, fatigue and weakness.

"It was rare in that it came on so suddenly, probably due to an infection in my immune system," she said. "I was very thin, anemic and frail as a child."

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Unable to attend school, she was taught at home by tutors and played with her and neighborhood children recruited by her mother.

"It was a childhood of isolation and pain, but it gave me time to reflect and know myself very well," Rizzo said. "I read constantly. Books allowed me to do things I couldn't do and to travel to places I couldn't go."

By high school she was sometimes well enough to attend an occasional class and involved in a few activities, like the debating club.

"I couldn't do a lot of things, like attend dances or football games," she said. "I accepted my situation, I'd had to, but I still longed to do things with my peers."

Rizzo began classes at Texas A&M University in College Station, Texas, in 1986. She dreamed of becoming a doctor, a marine biologist or a lawyer. But her disease progressed to the point she relied on friends for some of her most basic needs, tying her shoelaces.

"I found I couldn't hold a test tube and had to rethink my future," she said. "I turned to journalism, knowing I could write about things I could not participate in."

Rizzo earned a degree in journalism, and followed it with a master's degree in journalism at the University of North Texas.

Over the next few years, she devoted her professional and personal life to the advocacy of the disabled. While working in public relations related to disabilities as a peer counselor to the disabled, she also volunteered her free time to numerous advocacy groups. She wrote magazine articles, spoke at conferences and on television about disability issues.

"I created a unique niche for myself," she said. "I focused on my education, my professional life and church, my faith life. Dating wasn't easy. I was going through changes in my body as the disease progressed. I adjusted to it, but it's hard to deal with people's perceptions of you."

But by the late 1990s, however, her carefully crafted world began to fall apart.

"I'd lost the ability to drive and was looking for an assisted living facility to move to," she said. "I'd gone from using a cane, to a scooter to a wheelchair."

Unemployed for six months as she searched for an employer that could fully accommodate her special needs, she received a job offer in 1999 that totally changed her life.

"I was living lean. I was on the phone applying for emergency food stamps when I got a call on the other line about working at the Department of Education," she said.

One look around the streets near her current office on Maryland Avenue in Washington D.C., and she knew she was home.

"I looked around and saw people in wheelchairs, and a blind woman crossing the street with a baby on her shoulder," she said. "I did not see many people like myself on the main street in Texas."

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At work, Rizzo is provided an assistant to help with tasks that help her get her done, such as typing when her hands are too fatigued. At home, an aid helps her dress and prepares her meals. She appreciates the freedom Metro provides her.

"The most important thing for me is to remain as independent as I can," she said. "I can roll out of my apartment and taking mass transit to work, something I couldn't do in Texas."

During the Ms. Wheelchair competition this past week, Rizzo said she delighted in meeting so many other women facing similar struggles.

"It was incredible to network with them, to attend workshops and share ideas ranging from sexuality to workplace barriers," she said.

Ultimately, she said the competition recognized a special type of beauty.

"You're allowing people to see the beauty within, the beauty of accepting life on your own terms and never giving up hope," Rizzo said.

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A Hands-Off Approach

WASHINGTON POST 9/7/04

Using New Technology, Injured or Disabled Workers Can Talk Their Way to Productivity

By RITA ZEIDNER
Special to The Washington Post

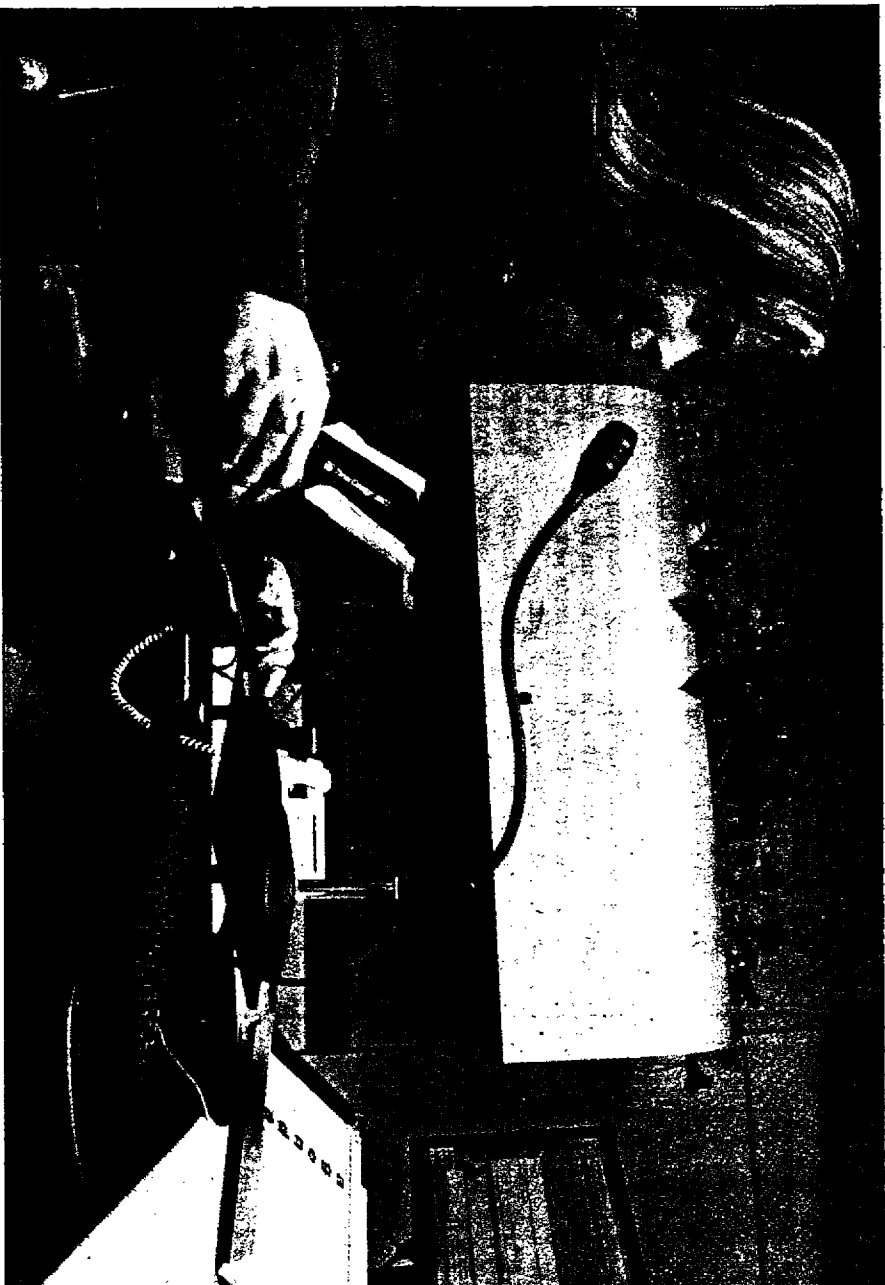
When David Pogue was diagnosed in 1996 with wrist synovitis—a painful, largely untreatable inflammation of the lining of the wrist joint—his doctor recommended he quit writing and playing the piano to relieve the pain.

That wasn't acceptable to the patient. "I only do two things in life," said Pogue, who writes a weekly New York Times column on consumer technology and pumps out several books a year—on topics as diverse as opera and Macintosh computers. "I write and I play the piano."

While Pogue cut back on the latter, he looked for another writing solution. He tried dictating to a stenographer. "It was fine for laying down the text," he said, but polishing his work proved a nightmare for both him and his assistant.

Ultimately, the Connecticut-based scribe found an answer in what was then only an emerging technology: computer software that transforms speech into electronic text. Pogue suffered through several generations of primitive programs that required him to speak slowly and haltingly into his computer. But he adapted, and

See HANDS, Page F4



Julie Rizzo, in the U.S. Education Department's Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services, uses voice recognition software to do computer work despite arthritis. Cheaper, better technology makes it easier for the injured to stay connected.

BY CHRIS KAPLAN—THE WASHINGTON POST

Can't Type? No Problem

HANDS. From P1

the technology improved. Today, Pogue said, voice recognition software allows him to turn out clean and error-free copy at nearly twice the speed the typical person types.

"It freaks people out," said Pogue, who has no financial ties to the software firms. "No one knows that a tool like this exists. It's absolutely jaw-dropping."

To be fair, Pogue's work as a tech reporter gives him an advantage over many people in terms of adaptability. Still, the coming of age of voice recognition products is good news, particularly for those worried that an injury—even a temporary one, like a broken arm or a sprained wrist—could cost them their job by keeping them from their keyboards. Should a hand-related injury or a motor-skills problem cramp your style, a new generation of moderately priced, user-friendly devices may get you back to your computer sooner than you—or your boss—thought possible.

Look, Ma, No Hands

Since the mid-1980s, high-tech devices that "hear" what a user says and turn the spoken word into electronic text have held out promise to amputees, upper-body paraplegics and others unable to type or manipulate a mouse, according to Kristine Neuber, an assistive technology specialist and director of George Mason University's Helen A. Keller Institute for Human Disabilities in Fairfax. The institute provides training and technical assistance to students with disabilities and their teachers. Like Pogue, Neuber said the early programs' reputation for intractability was well-deserved.

Not only did they require users to speak at an unnatural pace, they also turned out documents riddled with errors—for instance, typing "ice cream" when the user said, "I scream." By and large, only people with the most severe disabilities—and few other options—were willing to put up with the glitches, Neuber says.

The software also was prohibitively cost-

Today, much of that has changed. Voice recognition software packages priced at \$10,000 and up a decade ago can now be purchased for less than \$200. And they no longer require users to speak as though a listener were jotting their words in long-hand.

While most of the off-the-shelf products were not designed specifically for people with disabilities, they can be a boon to anyone struggling to use traditional computer equipment, according to Michael Young, manager of the Computer/Electronic Accommodations Program, a free Defense Department service that matches people with specialized equipment needs to the appropriate assistive technology.

Juliette Rizzo, communications director of the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services at the U.S. Department of Education, agrees. Five years ago, she began using a voice recognition program that allows her to continue working when her arthritis flares up and typing becomes painful.

"People in the office enjoy watching me use it," she said. "They see how easy it is and wish they had it on their computers."

Karen Jacobs, a Boston-based occupational therapist and a spokeswoman for the American Occupational Therapy Association, said the learning period for speech



Juliette Rizzo uses a voice recognition program to work at the Education Department.

recognition software is short enough that it's become a practical option even for those with short-term impairments.

"People hurt their hands all the time," said Jacobs, who, like many in her field, is seeing an increase in patients with hand-related injuries stemming from computer overuse. (The retractable leashes many people use to walk their dog are another notable culprit, since they can strain a user's index finger and twist the wrist, she said.) "For people who take the time to do the training—and we're talking about a half-hour or an hour—[voice recognition software] is fantastic," she said.

Consumers can choose among voice recognition products that can be downloaded onto a standard laptop or desktop computer. But most accessibility experts, including Neuber and Jacobs, strongly favor several products made by ScanSoft.

ScanSoft's Dragon NaturallySpeaking Preferred—boasts a 99 percent accuracy rate and an ability to take dictation at up to 160 words per minute. It sells for about \$200.

Young said he prefers NaturallySpeaking Professional Solutions 7, which costs several hundred dollars more. This version can respond to more-sophisticated voice-

activated commands, like moving through fields in databases and forms.

According to the ScanSoft's specifications, NaturallySpeaking requires a 500 MHz processor and 128 MB of RAM. But Neuber recommends a more powerful computer—an 800 MHz processor with at least 512 MB RAM—for optimal performance. The program is available only for Windows.

Speak Easy

Setting up NaturallySpeaking, like any other program, requires some manual dexterity. In addition to opening the box and sliding the CD into the computer—tasks easier said than done for someone wearing a cast, brace or sling—a user must "train" the computer to understand his voice and speech patterns. This requires attaching a microphone (one comes with the software) to the computer.

The remaining prep work is hands-free, requiring only that the user read a short series of passages aloud into the mike. After about five minutes, the system will have processed the particulars of the user's voice and be ready to obey voice-activated formatting commands, take dictation and

even follow directions for accessing e-mail and surfing the Web. (Earlier generations required nearly an hour of voice training.)

The program, unlike many people, will learn from its mistakes—once it's told what it's done wrong. The system works hard to make sense of words that are not familiar to it. Thus, had to retrain my computer during a demonstration not to "hear" my name, Rita Zeidner, as "read a wider."

But users may also learn from the software. Young maintains it's helped him become a better and more prepared speaker.

"I've learned to think ahead of what I say. If I don't, that software is going to type everything I say, whether I want it to or not."

(Users can easily direct the program to delete unwanted words and speech mannerisms, such as "um.")

Today, about 25 percent of NaturallySpeaking's customers rely on the product "for some type of assistive purpose," according to Robert Weideman, ScanSoft's senior vice president for marketing. Several users have multiple sclerosis and use the software to work around muscle spasms and tremors that get in the way of typing. Others use the software to stave off repetitive-motion injuries such as carpal tunnel syndrome or to prevent an existing condition from getting worse, he said. (The majority of customers, he said, simply don't want to type or rely on a stenographer.)

Nevertheless, most techies agree that despite dramatic improvements over the last decade, voice recognition may not be ready for the masses, and vice versa.

"There's very definitely a learning curve," said Pogue. "I made it work because I absolutely had no choice."

Mike Ebert, an Arlington-based technology policy consultant, said he learned about the limitations of voice recognition programs the hard way. After he broke several bones in his right hand during a kayaking mishap last summer, he hoped the off-the-shelf package he chose—IBM's ViaVoice—would make working at his computer easier while his hand healed in a cast. But he was disappointed when the software didn't respond to his commands. After giving it his best shot, he shelved it perma-

temporarily. "I found the technology was more frustrating than putting up with trying to type," he said.

Other Options

Struggling to use a standard keyboard or mouse, but don't like the idea of talking into a computer? Here are a few other low-cost alternatives:

■ **Check what you already have on hand.**

The "Accessibility Wizard" housed within Windows is one of Microsoft's best-kept secrets, said Young. This feature offers options to users who find it difficult to hold down multiple keys at once (such as Control, Alt and Delete). The Wizard also permits computers to be set to ignore repeated keystrokes, a helpful feature for people with hand tremors. In addition, users can change their mouse from the traditional right-handed set-up, which relies on the left click to move the cursor, to its left-handed mirror image. Or they can do away with the mouse altogether and perform all mouse functions on the keyboard. The accessibility program is housed in the Accessories section of Windows. **Price:** Free with Windows software.

■ **Keyboard options**

Oversized keyboards provide a solution for many with hand tremors or sensory de-

fects; undersized keyboards with keys spaced close together allow someone with a small range of motion or use of only one hand to access all the keys. Some specialized keyboards include filters that allow commonly used words and phrases to be entered in a single keystroke. **Price:** \$185 and up. Some products are available at office supply stores, but a wider selection is sold through specialty vendors. Contact the Alliance for Technology Access for a listing of products and sellers: 707-778-3011 (voice), 707-778-3015 (TTY); www.ataccess.org.

Specialty keyboards do have their detractors, however. Lilly Waters, a California-based motivational speaker who lost part of a hand in a childhood accident, said they draw attention to a disability—the last thing many people, particularly children, want. As an alternative, she designed a system for speedy one-handed typing she hawks over the Internet (www.aboutonehandtyping.com).

■ **Mouse options**

Various styles of mice ease hand strain and may be easier for some with hand or arm difficulties. Trackballs work like upside-down mouse units and minimize the need for hand or arm movement by allowing the user to manipulate the cursor with a movable ball. Joysticks move the cursor with a lever-like device usually operated by the hand or feet. Flat mouse touchpads require only a light touch to move the cursor. Rizzo, whose fingers don't bend easily around a standard mouse, relies on a pen-shaped mouse she can hold in her hand and operate entirely with her thumb. **Price:** \$50 and up at office supply stores and through specialty vendors.

■ **Low-tech options**

Flexiglass keyboard covers that slip over the keys can prevent users from pressing more than one key at a time. Armrests that attach to a desk or chair stabilize the arm and wrist while typing. **Price:** \$50 and up through specialty vendors. And don't overlook simple options like changing the angle of your keyboard by propping up the front or the back with a notepad or a book.

Resources

■ **The Computer/Electronic Accommodations Program (CAP)** Housed in the Pentagon, the program provides needs assessments, training and equipment to federal employees; its staff will also provide free needs assessments to the general public. Teleconferencing equipment allows people outside the Washington area to receive guidance. Call for an appointment: 703-693-6180; TTY 703-693-6189.

■ **Helen A. Keller Institute for Human Disabilities** Located at George Mason University in Fairfax, the institute lets individuals try out the latest in assistive technology. Call for an appointment: 703-693-3670; <http://hkid.gsu.edu>.

■ **University Legal Services Assistive Technology Program** for the District of Columbia The program provides free training and information to expand awareness about assistive technology. The center also has an equipment lending program. 202-547-0198; TTY 202-547-2667; www.utpd.org.

■ **Target Center** The center, managed by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, provides free needs assessments, equipment demonstrations, training and assistance for federal employees. Check out the center's online newsletter on ergonomic safety. 202-720-2600; www.usda.gov/oo/target/ontarget.html.

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